Charles Ramble, Peter Schwieger, Alice Travers (eds)

Tibetans who Escaped the Historian's Net

Studies in the Social History of Tibetan Societies

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Edited by
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HIDDEN HIMALAYAN TRANSCRIPTS: STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL OPPOSITION IN MUSTANG (NEPAL), 19TH–20TH CENTURIES

CHARLES RAMBLE

INTRODUCTION

It is to Antonio Gramsci that we owe one of the most influential theories of class oppression: the concept of social hegemony. Gramsci's theory arises from his division of the state into two entities: political society on the one hand and the sphere of civil society on the other. The state is the expression of the dominant "fundamental group"—a term that he used instead of "class" in order to avoid the attention of the censors in the prison where he wrote much of his work—which is the bourgeoisie. Political government takes the form of institutions such as the judiciary, the army and the police, which are openly coercive. Civil society, by contrast, is made up of "soft" entities such as the church, the family, schools and so forth. For the most part political government does not make its presence felt, and dominance over the masses is achieved thanks to their subscription to the values purveyed by the dominant group through the structures of civil society. This "spontaneous consent" to being dominated is what Gramsci refers to as social hegemony (Gramsci 1971: 12). It is only when this consent becomes visibly frayed, and the mechanisms of civil society fail to achieve their purpose, that the apparatus of political society must be applied to restore the status quo.

Although Gramsci was writing particularly about relations of production between classes (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat), his concept of social hegemony has been plausibly applied to numerous other contexts that entail the domination of one community by another. Examples include the study of inter-caste relations in India (Zene 2011), and the use of English literary studies as a device to inculcate British standards and values in colonial India via the school curriculum (Viswanathan 1989). It could, in principle, be applied to the social environment with which I shall be concerned in this paper. The setting is a

culturally Tibetan (and partly Tibeto-Burman) enclave in the Nepal, consisting of a hierarchical order of hereditary social groups. The rulers in the period with which we are concerned were the local aristocracy, and the Gramscian model would regard as evidence of "consenting domination" the many approving cultural formulations of the social order, such as the song-and-dance performances, known as *shon*, that were "offered" to the Nobility[1] at seasonal festivals by the Commoner rank, and in various reverential topoi that feature in folksongs. Here is what may be one of the simplest formulations of hegemony:

> One beautiful flower,
> Two beautiful flowers,
> Offer these beautiful flowers to the birthplace of the root-lama (*rtswa ba'i bla ma*).
>
> One beautiful flower,
> Two beautiful flowers,
> Offer these beautiful flowers to the birthplace of the lord who leads us (*'go 'dren dpon po*).
>
> One beautiful flower,
> Two beautiful flowers,
> Offer these beautiful flowers to the birthplace of our dear parents (*drin can pha ma*).

Gramsci's work has been criticised on numerous grounds, most commonly perhaps by Marxist writers who have taken issue with his interpretation of certain fundamental dogmas, such as historicism.[2] But perhaps the most devastating critique, delivered in deceptively non-confrontational tones, has come from James Scott, and is articulated in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990). Since it is of some importance to this article, the main points of the book's argument may be presented briefly.[3]

---

[1] The different social strata of the enclave in question will be rendered with capital initials, since some of them are nominally professions that are not actually practised. Thus not all Priests are priests, and Artisans no longer do any artisanal work, since this has become the province of Blacksmiths and Tailors.

[2] For an extended critical appraisal of Gramsci's thought see Anderson 1976.

[3] I am indebted to Sara Shneiderman for giving me the occasion to reflect on the relevance of James Scott's work to the social history of Tibetan-speaking communities.

Public and hidden transcripts: the case against Gramsci

The basic premise of Scott's critique is simple: Gramsci is wrong because there is no such thing as hegemony in the sense of domination with the consent of the dominated: subordinate groups do *not* subscribe to the world-view of those who dominate them. The illusion that this is the case is created by the success on the part of subordinate groups in concealing their disaffection: all that is accessible is the "public transcript", the official veneer used by such groups to hide their true sentiments. The more intolerant of resistance the dominant group is, the greater the degree of acquiescence shown by the dominated. This much is evident from the fact that, whenever the establishment eases the pressure, subordinates will test the waters with relatively anodyne expressions of discontent and, if these expressions are not immediately extinguished, will amplify the signs of their opposition.

More than once it has happened that the dominant have mistakenly regarded such concessions as a safety valve that permits the underclass to let off pressure before returning to their state of habitual subservience. In fact, these opportunities are not a safety valve: they are the thin end of a wedge. The archetypal example is that of the case of the *Cahiers de doléances*, the opportunity given by Louis XVI to the French peasantry (among others) in the spring of 1789 to register their complaints against the government in publicly accessible lists. The complaints lodged there were careful to accuse the corrupt and exploitative officers of the state and church, never the king himself. But the chance to express grievances in this way did not result in the peasantry returning to its previous condition of apparent acceptance; it culminated, within a very few months, in the French Revolution (*ibid.*: 77, 146).

The remarkable thing, Scott suggests, is not that people should subscribe to a world-view that places them in a position of inferiority; it is rather that they should have the courage at all to vent their discontent, given the brutal response that history has shown generally follows manifestations of resistance. The point is illustrated by examples from the recent history of Tibet, a region that Scott does not consider among the many cases he cites.

In the two decades between the suppression of the Tibetan uprising of 1959 and the end of the Cultural Revolution there were a few outbreaks of resistance in rural communities but, to the best of my knowledge, not a single recorded public expression of discontent in Lhasa.

Five years after Beijing's declaration of religious tolerance in the form of the famous Document 19 of 1982 (*The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period*), the Tibetan capital was rocked by large-scale demonstrations, spearheaded by religious figures. The unrest was quickly and effectively calmed. In 2008, awareness of international visibility provided an environment for even more widespread protests, not just in Lhasa but throughout the Tibetan-speaking parts of the People's Republic of China, with results that the demonstrators must surely have foreseen.

In view of the consequences for one's livelihood (especially for those working in the public sector) or one's family, resistance tends to be muted to the point of near-imperceptibility. Some poignant examples of such—literally—inaudible messages are given by Maria-Luisa Nodari in a recent study of the history of Chinese mountaineering. To cite just one instance: on 4 April 1985 nine members of a Tibetan team of climbers reached the peak of Mt Cho Oyu as the culmination of a climb that had been organised as part of the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the Tibet Autonomous Region. In their book on Chinese mountaineering, Zhou Zheng and Liu Zhenkai report the event—apparently in all innocence—as follows: "Unfurling a [national] flag they tried to shout out 'Long life to the Fatherland', but their throat were too parched" (Zhou and Liu 1995: 151, cited in Nodari 2012: 67).

In the absence of any arena for the overt expression of discontent it is often the arts that provide the context for protest. In the case of visual arts, the message is conveyed through the presence of salient cultural symbols (white stupas, for example) or the juxtaposition of motifs that serve to reinforce bonds among those who understand the implicit intention. The more public the forum, the subtler the message must be. A Tibetan artist who worked from his home once showed me his oeuvre. Most paintings carried political messages of varying degrees of subtlety. One canvas showed a Tibetan-style cairn composed not of stones but of heaped-up human corpses, and surmounted by a pole bearing a red flag. He commented, rather unnecessarily, that he had no plans to exhibit this one. By contrast, on another occasion I happened to be standing near the front desk of one of Lhasa's main international hotels with the man who had conceived and executed the decoration of the foyer walls, while he pointed out to me, with no small satisfaction, the damning messages concealed in the scenes he had created.

Perhaps the best-documented medium for expression of nonconformity is song. Contemporary popular songs contain veiled references to *personae non gratae* and outlawed aspirations. As in the case of visual arts, the trick here is to achieve a balance between being comprehensible to insiders while remaining opaque to the watchful authorities. There are numerous instances in recent years of songs that enjoyed wide popularity at least partly because of the perceived subtext of their lyrics until, in certain cases at least, the censors themselves read between the lines and prohibited further diffusion over the airwaves. The significance of song in Tibetan social criticism is of course not confined to the post-1950s era. Melvyn Goldstein's study of Lhasa street songs provides numerous illustrations of excoriating political wit (Goldstein 1982), and Michael Aris' study of Bhutanese balladry situates its subject within the more general phenomenon of Tibetan and Himalayan anti-establishment mendicant singers (Aris 1987). To the best of my knowledge the most extensive study to date on the continuity of the Tibetan tradition of social criticism across a range of literary genres is to be found in a recent and still unpublished work by Lama Jabb (2013: 60–92; on modern songs and Tibetan national sentiment, see also Lama Jabb 2012). While the avarice of the clergy and the oppressive brutality of lords are recurring motifs in these songs, we still know very little about the day-to-day life of the Tibetan peasantry, and have almost no chance to hear what they themselves might have had to say about the government officials, local rulers and monastic agents whose exactions brought them to, and often beyond, the brink of penury. Official documents of the sort discussed by Jeannine Bischoff in this volume are of inestimable value for understanding the quotidian hardships of Central Tibetan *mi ser*, and their methodical or desperate responses to their living conditions; but they remain, nevertheless, public transcripts of the people's lives.

In the case of the recent Tibetan uprisings mentioned above, the response of the dominant group seems to have been astonishment and a sense of betrayal that a people who ought to have been grateful for their peaceful liberation should have bitten the hand that had freed them. Among the many comparable examples that are considered by Scott—and that I shall return to below—is that of the slaves in the Ante-bellum American South. During the Civil War, white families were shocked and distressed by the suspicion that their loyal slaves might actually be hoping for victory for the North. Their suspicions were aroused not by any statement to this effect by the slaves, but by the absolute silence of the latter on the issue.

How then, could the Gramscian theory of hegemony have got it so wrong? Because, says Scott, the theory takes at face value the version of events to which the subordinate groups *claim* to subscribe. This is the version to which Scott refers as the "public transcript". Violent uprisings and eloquent silences are not spontaneous manifestations; they are the expressions of a well-formulated view of the world that is drastically different from the official discourse. And if these expressions come as a shock to the dominant groups, that is precisely because the latter are not privy to the well-concealed sentiments that generated them. It is for this reason that Scott refers to such alternative versions, as well as to their manifestations, as "hidden transcripts".

THE SETTING: THE DUKEDOM OF BARAGAON

While Scott acknowledges his debt to the growing body of published "history from below", he emphasises the problems encountered by certain social historians in tackling their subjects: the subordinate groups in question were sometimes so cautious as to have left barely any written evidence at all. A case in point is Christopher Hill's study of the seventeenth-century Lollards, whose heterodox religious beliefs are so difficult to ascertain because their followers "were anxious to leave no traces" (Hill 1982: 41, cited Scott 1990: 88). When such evidence does come to light it often reveals a degree of structure and coordination of which the dominant groups are generally entirely unaware.

In this contribution I wish to present a selection of documents produced by different subordinate communities that reveal secret strategies of coordination of precisely this sort. The area concerned is the southern part of what is now Nepal's Mustang District. Extensive studies of the history and ethnography of this region are to be found in several publications,[4] but a few words should be said here to provide the necessary political and social context.

Baragaon, literally the "twelve villages" (Nep. Bāhragāũ) is actually an enclave of eighteen settlements that once formed part of the kingdom of Lo, but whose ruler—a duke who was administering the area on behalf of the king—seceded from the parent kingdom in the 17th century and became a direct vassal of the powerful principality of

[4] See for example Schuh 1994, 1995; Ramble 1985, 2008a.

Jumla. After the unification of Nepal in the late 18th century, the dukes of Baragaon retained judicial and administrative powers under the authority of the Gorkhas until the mid-19th century, when the government of Nepal—by now in the hands of the dynastic rule of the Rana Prime Ministers—auctioned off these rights, as well as the power to collect taxes, to a non-local contractor. The communities are all Tibetan speaking with the exception of an enclave of five, collectively known as the Shod yul, whose inhabitants speak a Tibeto-Burman language known as Se skad. The population is socially stratified in five ranks (*rgyud pa*): the Nobility (*sras po, dpon po*), the Priesthood (*bla mchod*), the Commoners (*phal pa*), Artisans (*'gar ba*) and Indo-European service castes, specifically Blacksmiths and Tailors. The Nobility, the Artisans and the service castes are endogamous, whereas the Priesthood and the Commoners intermarry. The Commoners themselves are stratified into two ranks: members of the Shod yul—who are considered by the rest of Baragaon to comprise the majority of the lower rank of Commoners—do not generally marry outside their subenclave, while one of the Shod yul—a settlement named Te—was until a decade ago itself almost entirely endogamous.

This rather essentialised summary is inevitably an oversimplification of what is of course a much more complicated picture, but the many nuances are not relevant to the cases that will be examined below.

Baragaon vs Kathmandu

The highest-level, most "public", hidden transcripts in Baragaon are those in which the entire population is seen to be united against an external entity. Such documents are uncommon, but the archive of the community of Lubrak contains a particularly explicit example of such an agreement that embraces all the social strata of the enclave. (The presence of the document in Lubrak's archive is explained by the fact that this priestly community was a sort of scribal office for Baragaon.) The beginning of the document is damaged, but from the names of the signatories it can be safely dated to the 1880s. The document is a resolution to oppose an attempt by the government to move a certain customs post to a location that would have been disadvantageous to Baragon. While the details do not concern us here, two brief excerpts are relevant because they provide unequivocal declarations of unity.

Since the language of the first of these is somewhat opaque, the transliteration is followed by an amended rendering in more conventional orthography.[5]

> ...de la bgrong dpa' med khra dzhal sngo dpon bo tshang ma lar rgya 1 man dpa' 2 med...
> (de la grong pa me khral zhal ngo dpon po tshang ma lhan rgyas 1 [ma zad] 2 min)
>
> In this [matter], everyone—[members of] full estates, subsidiary households and noble aristocrats—shall form a single, undivided body.

Secondly, the document concludes with the statement that:

> ...dpon bang tshang ma nas chod [tsh]igs =ie= (yi ge) ['br]i {±3S}
>
> This document of agreement has been written by all nobles and subjects. (Lubrak doc. 1)

But as stated above, such expressions of unity of purpose between the ruling elite and the commoners seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. The power of the aristocracy has waned over the course of time, and for the past decades their status has been largely ceremonial (though even this is being challenged by their traditional social inferiors in the wake of the Maoist insurgency). However, it is quite clear from the available sources—and, to a lesser extent, from living memory—that their authority was reinforced by political power and coercion. The duke of Baragaon had the authority to choose a Commoner headman for all of Baragaon, apparently as a sort of liaison between the headmen of the individual communities and the ruling aristocracy. Some of the administrative and ceremonial functions of this headman in the late seventeenth century are detailed in a document studied by Dieter Schuh (1995), though information of the period between then and the advent of ethnographic research in the 1970s is largely lacking.

[5] The conventions followed in the transliterated passages are as follows: {abc} = intentional deletions; Z = *che rtags*; ˆ = *tsha rtags*, a small diagonal stroke used as an abbreviation for various letters, but most frequently *tsha*. The Tibetan text of the excerpts is unedited unless stated otherwise. Contracted forms (*bskungs yig*) are represented as closely as possible as they appear in the text, followed by a full-length form in brackets.

Oppression and resistance

The case of one nineteenth-century headman whose name does appear in a number of documents from Kag—one of the "capitals" (*rgyal sa*) of Baragaon—is worth citing, because it provides anecdotal evidence of the oppressiveness of the dominant groups. The headman in question, Genpa Daro (rGan pa Dar po), is named in tax documents for a number of years in the second half of the 19th century up to 1864 (Ramble 1994). (The fact that the texts name at least one other person with the title of *rgan pa* does suggest that the position of headman was no longer the solitary ducal appointment it had originally been.) A well-known story has it that Genpa Daro was a champion of the welfare of the common people and this outspoken defence of their rights provoked the enmity of the aristocracy. If the story is true, it may well be the case that he was attempting to uphold the law against abuses perpetrated by the local nobility against a populace who were either unaware of their legal rights or were unable to exercise them—we shall see documented cases of this sort presently. One of the noblewomen was married to the ruler in Kathmandu,[6] and she was able to obtain the seal with which to authorise a forged death-warrant against the turbulent headman. On receipt of the document, the Nobles or their henchmen took Genpa Daro to the river below the settlement, where they beheaded him, and hung his head under a bridge. The last detail is more than just a gratuitous act of barbarity. It is not uncommon in Mustang to see the heads of goats hanging under bridges. These are animals that have died of some sort of cerebral disorder locally described simply as "madness", and hanging the heads of the dead animals under bridges is believed to prevent the condition from spreading. The sight of Genpa Daro's head dangling above the river would have sent a clear message to anyone who saw it.

Even if this story is apocryphal it carries echoes of palpable popular animosity towards the dominant groups; and, as we shall see, there is certainly documentary evidence—from precisely this time—both of exploitation of the community by the local elite and also of abuses perpetrated in defiance of rulings from far-away Kathmandu.

The dukes of Baragaon may have been the rulers of the enclave, and the political structure was evidently a top-down scheme with a single

[6] It is at least possible that there was a woman of Kag who was a member of a Rana household, since the provision of young women to the Rana court formed part of Baragaon's tax obligations at this time.

appointed headman liaising between the nobility and the local village leaders, but there is clear evidence that the communities had mechanisms for acephalous or "horizontal" communication and coordination that bypassed the apical figures. One of the most striking illustrations of this is a document from 1863 which shows the commoners of Baragaon acting concertedly as a unified body. In 1857 the government had introduced a contract (Nep. *ijara*) system whereby the hereditary aristocracy were displaced by an outsider who had bid successfully for the right to collect revenues in the region.[7] The contractor exercised his prerogatives through local agents, who seem to have been none other than the local nobility whom he had in certain respects displaced. In any event, the obligations imposed by the contractor were far more burdensome than had been the case under the dukes, and the people of Baragaon lost no time in presenting their grievances to the government. Details concerning this document are given elsewhere (Ramble forthcoming a), but certain salient points may be summarised here. We do not have the petition that was actually submitted to the government. The document that is available to us is a Tibetan translation of the Nepali text that the government issued by way of a response to Baragaon's complaints, but the *narratio* section rehearses the content of the petition, giving us a full list of the grievances that are then addressed.

A selection from the twelve complaints will give some idea of the causes of dissatisfaction: the contractor imposes fines without consultation with locally respected figures; the period of unpaid provision of firewood has increased from four months to eight months; pack- and riding-animals are requisitioned without notice, whereas customarily several days' notice was given to enable people to bring the animals down from the pastures; while exemption from tax payments had been conceded for six nobles houses, this privilege has now been extended to the houses of their illegitimate children (presumably those of the contractor or his aristocratic agents); fines that use previously to be paid partly in cash and partly in grain must now be paid exclusively in cash; fines for forbidden sexual liaisons between Commoners and

[7] The contractor in question was almost certainly a certain Hem Karna Khadga. It is known that this individual held the customs contract from 1862 to 1867, and the document seems to suggest that the contractor at the time the document was issued in 1863 was the same as the one at the time of the events with which it deals three years earlier (Vinding 1998: 81). See also *ibid.*: 399, where the contractor is named as Captain Hemakarna Khadka Chhetri.

Artisans have been increased; villagers are fined for failing to gather firewood for the lord even when they have been prevented from doing so by heavy snow; the contractors' aristocratic agents send their livestock into the commoners' fields even before they have been harvested.

The government's response was mixed: it upheld most of the complaints, rejected some and compromised on others. However, our concern here is less with the outcome of the case than with the fact that the petition was produced and submitted at all. The formulation of the complaint makes it entirely clear that the eighteen villages of Baragaon, far from requiring an apical duke to manage and direct their activities, were fully capable of coordinating an effective legal strategy. The matter did not stop there. In the course of the government's investigation of the contractor's alleged abuses it was discovered that Baragaon had failed to pay its government taxes for one year in the period before the introduction of the *ijara* system, when one of the dukes was still in power. The duke was prosecuted and compelled to pay the government the money he had collected from Baragaon as taxes but omitted to pass on, while the population demanded—and received—a written apology from their former lord for having deceived them in this way. If there was ever a written correspondence to enable the coordination required to achieve these results, it has not yet come to light. All we can say with confidence is that a great deal of complex coordination must have taken place behind the scenes.

Strategies for alleviating oppression: the case of Lubrak's taxes

The document cited here shows the communities of Baragaon acting in concert to uphold their interests—and rights—against the exactions of its rulers. There were numerous instances in which it was not the entire enclave but one or more of its component settlements that are singled out for victimisation of one sort or another.

The Priestly (*bla mchod*) rank in Baragaon are for the most part concentrated in two communities: the Buddhist village of Chongkhor and the Bonpo settlement of Lubrak. The taxes paid by Lubrak had for centuries been a largely symbolic affair, consisting of a small quantity of *goji* berries, wild chives and some birch bark (Ramble and Vinding 1987: 18). It had paid these items to whichever principality had had jurisdiction over it at different periods: Thini, immediately to the south of Baragaon, is named as the beneficiary power in one document, and Manang, to the east of Mustang, in another. It seems to be the case that

it continued this token gesture to the rulers of Baragaon until the latter part of the nineteenth century, after which point the concession was terminated and a substantial levy imposed. Lubrak refused to pay, and the dukes who were then in power—probably as the agents of the contractor at that time, a certain Krishna Prasad Thakali—responded by sending henchmen to expropriate property from individual households. It is only in the *internal* archive of Lubrak itself that we know something of the strategy adopted by the community to cope with these depredations:

> 4. ... blu brags yul pa gro pa mo rang ma {kha' don tshig}
>
> 5. rnaṃs 'dzoṃ nas / grong re mi re nas spe don gnas sngar pa srol la med pa la / dpon bang rnaṃs nas
>
> 6. lags bcugs pa shar tshe grong pa mo rang ma gsu yis gyud khyer kyang yul pa 'dzoṃ gnas gyud sde thogs la
>
> 7. rin skyabs byas nas rin ma pham pa yul nas srad gyud mchod pa yin /
>
> A vote was held at a meeting consisting of one person from each household, and it was agreed that, even though there had been no such tradition in the past, if the lords and their subjects should lay their hands on anyone and expropriate the property of either an estate or a subsidiary household, a village meeting should be held; an assessment should be carried out of that property, and its value restored to the owner in full by the community. (Lubrak doc. 2)

But Lubrak is a small settlement, and if, as this "hidden transcript" shows, it had developed a strategy for alleviating the hardships suffered by individual families by distributing their losses across the community, they were powerless to prevent the raids of the bailiffs.

The importance of horizontal coordination: the case of the Shod yul

If Lubrak had no natural allies with whom it might make common cause against the rest of Baragaon and its leaders, this was not the case with the five villages comprising the subsidiary enclave of the Shod yul. While there are very few recorded instances of *individual* Shod yul clashing with the rest of Baragaon, there are numerous cases in which the five settlements presented themselves as a unified bloc against the majority. One of these altercations flared up in 1922, when the Shod yul sent a declaration of non-cooperation to the headmen (*rgan pa*) and warden (*spyi khyab*) of southern Baragaon. The cause of the conflict is not recorded, but the document contains five points stating that, henceforth, the Shod yul will boycott all future meetings of Baragaon and

will refuse to pay their share of the expenses for the enclave's officials. But it is the preamble to the document that is particularly interesting for our present purposes:

> 1. [...] ngos mi
> 2. zer smong pa gla skra rnams la / mis ngan pa skra res nyis nas 'dug spo mang rig stong
> 3. ba rkyen gi / 'dis phar lngar byas gyab gyur dar byas dwong len byas nas / kha cig spyes 2
> 4. mis byis pa ngos rten yin / dwa sta ngos shod yul lnga phyes spya mo chung spa ra don
> 5. tshan gang byung skyang cigs spa ma stogs spa 7 med Zzhin / ngos yul 5 / nas zur go yon
> 6. su nas byas skyang / bha dngul 500 lnga 'rgya tham spa nye spa Zzha Zzhud med'i (med pa'i)
> 7. len gyu yin /
>
> Because a few wicked people have been inflicting various forms of hardship on us dumb [*gla skra* < Nep. *lāṭa*], backward people, we shall henceforth abandon whatever procedures may have been usual in the past and adopt new policies. We shall certainly not behave as if we had two tongues in one mouth, but in whatsoever mater may arise, whether it be as great as a double six [in a game of dice] or as insignificant as two ones, we five Shod yul shall act as one, and stand undivided. Whichever of us five Shod yul diverges from this policy shall pay a fine of 500 rupees, and no excuses will be accepted. (HMA/Baragaon/Tib/05)

To the extent that this document was intended to be read by (or to) the entirety of Baragaon, it corresponds to what Scott refers to as the public transcript. It tells Baragaon nothing about the procedures whereby the five communities arrived at this consensus. It does provide the assurance that the Shod yul do not speak "as if they had two tongues in one mouth"—meaning that none of them will betray another—and backs up this declaration of unanimity by saying that each one is bound to the agreement on pain of paying a fine of 500 rupees (an almost impossibly large sum at that time) for violating this union. This may well have been true, but the fact that they announced it was clearly intended to persuade Baragaon that they meant business, since no one would trifle with such large sums.

In certain cases it would not have been in the Shod yul's interest to reveal that they had made any sort of separate arrangement among themselves. Plenary meetings of Baragaon were held periodically to decide on matters that concerned the enclave as a whole—such as trade and transit arrangements with northern Mustang, or in negotiating with

the government over the positioning of checkposts. It was expected in such cases that the village representatives would be acting in the interest of Baragaon as a whole, without consideration of individual community interests.

What Baragaon did not know—or at least, was never explicitly told by the Shod yul—was that, prior to any plenary gathering of the enclave the five would hold a secret meeting and decide how they were going to vote at the general assembly. The following excerpt is taken from a document from the archive of Te, and records a resolution of the five Shod yul that they should vote as a bloc.

> An agreement among the five Shod yul. Wherever we have to attend a meeting, whether far or near, in accordance with the traditional practice of Ngazhab [the commoners of Baragaon], we five villages shall place our votes in the same place, not separately. Whichever village casts its votes separately shall be fined.[8]

In the course of such general assemblies the other communities of Baragaon may well have *suspected* that the five Shod yul were in collusion, but the fact that the documentary record for such an arrangement was not in the public domain meant that there was no evidence to prove the existence of such well-organised factionalism. This document, and others like it, belong to the hidden transcript of the Shod yul as a collectivity. We might imagine such an assembly of Baragaon, and the frustration that the leaders must have felt at the imperviousness of the representations of the Shod yul to reasonable arguments, and the conviction that the wearers of those masks of innocence might not be as "dumb and backward" as they claimed to be. We are reminded of the suspicion elicited by the particular inscrutability of American slaves when the topic of the Civil War was raised:

> Noting that her slaves fell uncharacteristically silent whenever the latest news from the front in the Civil War became a topic of white conversation, Mary Chestnut took their silence as one that hid something: "They go about in their black masks, not a ripple of emotion showing; and yet on all other subjects except the war they are the most excitable of all races...". (Scott 1990: 3, citing Patterson 1982: 208)

The tenacity of the Gramscian notion of hegemony, Scott notes, is sustained in no small measure by the reality that many subordinate groups are non-literate. It is only from their coordinated response to persecu-

[8] HMA/Te/Tib/51. The full text and translation of this document are given in Ramble 2008b: 286.

tion that the existence of behind-the-scenes organisation can be inferred. Fortunately for us, the evidence of local archives in Mustang renders the effort of such inference unnecessary. Several documents offer priceless insights into the precise mechanisms for the manufacture of consent. Here is another excerpt from a document (from 1936) from the Shod yul's archives:

> 1. [...] sgan pa mi ngo lnga yi skor nas sngon bsrol nar rtar
> 2. mchod tshig dbyed pa stod nas phyi dra nang nas smad dra gang rtar byung na yang yul kha lnga po grong pa yul gang dra tham cad gcig chong gnyis chong
> 3. man pa khyod stod shos khyo tshug shos khyod bsteng yod shos khyod tsang li shos khod gya ga shos bzer ba med sgal srid zer ba yul nas 'byung na
> 4. bha dngul 100 grong pa nas gram na bha dngul 23 yin [...]
>
> The headmen [of the] five [Shod yul] must adhere to past custom. If enemies come from the north or south, from without or within or wherever, all the [five] villages and their households must act as one, and no one may say "You are Te Shod, you are Taye Shod" (i.e. that it is your problem, not ours) and so forth. If an entire village acts in this way the fine will be 100 rupees; if a household does so, it will be 23 rupees. (LTshognam/Tib/16)

Spontaneous constancy to a policy of solidarity in the face of oppression is never something that can be taken for granted, and subordinate groups customarily adopt coercive measures of various sorts to ensure that their members do not break ranks, and to punish those that do. The preferred method among the Shod yul was by the threat of fines of which the levels were specified for recidivist individuals, households and entire communities. Most important, however, was the oath of secrecy sworn annually by the assembled Shod yul. The procedures for taking this oath are spelled out in the same document:

> 6. stod nas phyi 'dra smad nas nang 'dra gang 'dra 'byung kyang sgan pa dun du bcug dyab du mi mang phyi skor nang skor byas nas
> 7. cig chong gnyis chong man pa nga bsted pa'i bcan tshug mi shes nga tsang le bcan btsug mi shes nga gya ga bcan tsug mi shes
> 8. nga tshug bcan tshug mi shes nga bsteng yed bcan tshug mi shes bzer ba med pa sgan pa na ma rim bzhin gyi bcan tshug la lag rtam
> 9. mi mang pho thog mo thog tham cad gon pa la mi mang lag rkor kyis stags de rta bu la ka dros 'cham nas phyi rtam nang du man pa nang rtam
> 10. phi ru kyol yod dam bzer nas sna dyal hor zla 3 pa'i tshe 10 byed rgyu yin

> If outside (i.e. Tibetan?) enemies come from the north, and inside enemies (Nepalese?) come from the south, the headman should be in front, the supervisors behind them, and the populace in an outer and inner circle, and they should act as one. [Each supervisor] should not say "I cannot act as the supervisor of Te" or whatever. The headmen each in turn should grasp the hands of the supervisor; each man and woman offers his or her hand to the headman. Having so united they swear an oath to the effect that they should bear information about the outside to the inside, and should not convey inside information to the outside. This oath shall be sworn on the tenth day of every third Hor month. (*ibid.*)

This injunction to secrecy appears in much the same form in the archives of most of the communities, and was probably universal in Mustang, at least as an oral formulation if not as a written policy. Such a policy of village-level *omertà* still certainly prevails through Mustang in cases of inter-community disputes or criminal investigations by police. In the case of the document under consideration here, there is a sort of double oath: not only must the people of the Shod yul swear an oath of secrecy, but they must *also* swear not to reveal to anyone that they have sworn such an oath at all. An addendum to the document states:

> 11. […] yul ka lnga po'i rgan pa skags du gsu 'dzom kyang
> 12. kha 1 ce 2 byas nas lab sa med / rgan pa can btsugs yul pa thaṃd (thams cad) gsu na =kya[l] 'dugs zer ba gang byung na / rbun 'drigs chad dngul 25 / dang yul nas byas pa sheˆr (sher [< shar] tshe) / 'drid chad
> 13. dngul 100 phul phyogs zhus pa /
>
> If any headman of the five [Shod yul] goes to Kag for a meeting he shall not speak with two tongues in one mouth (i.e. with duplicity); if a headman, supervisor or all the villagers admit that they have sworn this oath there will be a 25-rupee fine for individuals and a fine of 100 rupees for villages. (*ibid.*)

The archive of Te contains half a dozen documents from which it is possible to piece together a protracted dispute in which the five Shod yul, seriously—and illegally—put upon by the King of Lo, were able to coordinate their resistance effectively enough to shake off his oppression. The event is described in some detail (and the relevant documents presented) elsewhere, but the main episodes in the dispute are worth reproducing here.

The apparatus of the central government was not well developed in the peripheral areas of post-unification Nepal, and authority was generally delegated to local elites who had either cooperated with the

Gorkhas during their campaign, or else had been elevated to positions of power by the conquerors. The policy of both the Shah and Rana administrations was to erode the prerogatives of these provincial elites in favour of individuals or structures more directly connected with the country's rulers (Regmi 1972: 29–33). Although the details are not always clear, it appears that the king had been entitled to certain categories of tax and services from the Shod yul (as well as one other community), but that in 1863 the government had abolished these services and declared that the revenues in question should be redirected to the local customs office. The King of Lo did not accept this ruling, and continued to exact what he regarded as his hereditary dues until, in 1900, the Shod yul asked the Rana government to intervene in the matter. The secret documents of the Shod yul—this particular collection is kept in the archive of Te—suggest that the government's confirmation of its earlier position was not readily forthcoming. The enclave engaged certain prominent aristocrats to go to Kathmandu to intercede on their behalf, and this cost money—honoraria for the mediators and fees and bribes for the authorities in the capital—which was secretly raised by collecting payments from all the families on the basis of the numbers of livestock each one possessed. At the same time, the five villages adopted a policy of passive resistance to the king. A royal visit to any of the villages in the past would have meant receiving the royal party at some distance from the settlement, entertaining them with food and drink, leading their horses by the bridle and so on. On 14 March 1910 the Shod yul passed a resolution prohibiting its members from precisely these activities, and specifying fines of 100 rupees and 16 rupees respectively for any community or individual whose nerve might fail. A sort of early warning system was also implemented, whereby any village that had reason to believe a royal party was about to descend on it would send missions to the neighbouring settlements, who would in turn dispatch a delegation to support their beleaguered ally.

The strategy proved successful: the Shod yul's non-cooperation, backed up by a missive from Kathmandu confirming the ineligibility of the services claimed by the king, resulted in liberation from the royal oppressor (Ramble 2008a: 63–70).

Conclusion

As a case study in the opposition of public to hidden transcripts the archives of Baragaon are a particularly rich source, since they offer an insight into several degrees of concealment. The manoeuvring of Baragaon as a whole against its noble or contractual chiefs was carried on without the knowledge of the leadership; and Baragaon itself had no inkling of the elaborate scheming of the five Shod yul in pursuit of their own common interest; nor was the King of Lo privy to the strategies the Shod yul had formulated to deprive him of what he regarded as his hereditary rights. But the layers of the onion do not stop there. The Shod yul may have been united against forces that they regarded as their common oppressors, but the archives of the individual settlements contain abundant evidence of strategies that each adopted against one or more of its neighbours in disputes, generally relating to pasture boundaries.[9] These documents were clearly not for the public eye of the Shod yul, who had ceased in these circumstances to be the ally and had become instead the enemy. A policy of openness would have led to the people of Te being deprived of their resources by their neighbours, just as surely as by any king, contractor or duke.

The significance of this last example is that it takes us beyond relations of simple dominance to a confrontation between peers: clearly, hidden transcripts are not the monopoly of a social underclass but are likely, in some form or other, to be a feature of any group that aims to preserve its collective identity in an environment in which its integrity is threatened; and even dominant groups—as Scott rightly points out—need a private space in which they can figuratively mess together and unbuckle the burden of affectations that they must wear if they are to be credible oppressors.

Most of the examples given here do deal with relations between groups of unequal social standing, and in the majority of cases the direction of persecution follows the natural order, so to speak: it is the aristocracy who are bullying their social inferiors—priests and commoners—while the "sub-Commoner" of the Shod yul are being put upon by Commoners in one case and royalty in another. But in relations between members of the Shod yul the impulse to secrecy has nothing to do with the opposition of a weaker group by a more powerful one. It

[9] For examples of such "internal" strategies against neighbouring communities, see Ramble 2008a: chapter 4.

is, rather, the strategic caution of a community that knows it will be endangered by too much openness about its internal affairs.

The "hidden transcripts" of which a few examples have been presented here were made available by the communities that own them because they felt that such revelation no longer carried any risk. There are other documents to which I have been denied access because publication might, it was felt, render the community vulnerable. In the case of the most underprivileged groups in the region it is probable that there are no historical accounts at all, beyond sporadic appearances in the archives of the communities to which they are attached. The hardships we have seen inflicted on the Priests and Commoners in these documents must surely pale in comparison with the cruelties and indignities visited on the region's Blacksmiths and Tailors. A sensitive anthropological enquiry might discover in this community an attitude to their statutory betters that is at odds with the good-humoured acquiescence its members characteristically convey; the success among them of Maoist politicians and Christian missionaries in recent years is evidence enough of unarticulated discontent. Their ascending generations, however, left no written traces because they could not write, and probably had no one trustworthy to write for them; but the documents from other groups seen in this article do suggest that, whatever they may have said and done in public, they are unlikely to have been under the spell of anyone else's social hegemony.

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